

Ethical and practical problems in action research

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Coghlan & Shani (2005)

Roles, Politics, and Ethics in Action Research Design

Overview

- Claim 1: For novice action researchers, critical factors of roles, politics and ethics in AR are critical issues in the design and implementation of AR
- Claim 2: A systemic design-based framework enables action researchers to anticipate what they need to consider...[and]...brings to the forefront the issues of context, roles, politics and ethics.
- Four sets of propositions that viewed as a way to pursue an ongoing dialogue and collaborative inquiry.

Roles, politics and ethics

- *Roles* represent the expectations, motivations and behaviors which individuals expect of others performing specific functions or tasks.
- *Politics* – gaining access, using data, disseminating and publishing reports are intensely political acts.
- *Ethics* – not feasible to map out a detailed anticipation of ethical issues → ethical dilemmas will arise in the course of AR.

A systemic design-based framework

- Proposition: A systemic design-based framework of the action research process includes...:
 - *Context* – environmental, organizational and individual characteristics.
 - *Inquiry mechanisms* – the formal and informal configuration created within the organization for the purpose of developing and enhancing human and organizational performance.
 - *Inquiry cycle* – the four main phases of diagnosing, planning action, taking action and evaluating action.
 - *Outcomes* – the actionable knowledge that was created as a result of the effort.

Proposition 1 & 2

- *Proposition 1.* The greater the role clarity among the different actors involved in the action research process, the more willing participants will be to participate in the process.
- *Proposition 2.* The greater the contextual complexity, the more complex the role dynamics, the more political power games and the more difficult the development of role clarity.

Proposition 3 & 4

- *Proposition 3.* The greater the contextual complexity, the more critical is the role of the AR inquiry mechanisms.
- *Proposition 4.* The greater the variety of structures and processes in the AR inquiry mechanisms the greater the challenge of developing role clarity within and outside the AR inquiry mechanism.

Proposition 5 & 6

- *Proposition 5.* The features and dynamics of the AR inquiry mechanisms will effect the AR inquiry cycle and will lead to organizational improvement and to the creation of new knowledge.
- *Proposition 6.* The greater the variety of the resources represented in the AR inquiry mechanisms, the more difficult there will be to facilitate the AR inquiry cycle.

Proposition 7 & 8

- *Proposition 7.* The political nature of the organization results in politics dynamics, role complexity, and ethical dilemmas that impact the AR inquiry mechanisms, AR inquiry cycle and AR outcomes.
- *Proposition 8.* To the extent that the quality of the relationship developed in the AR inquiry mechanism is high, the quality of the AR inquiry cycle and its outcomes will be high.

Two ethical dilemmas in terms of “role contamination” (Morton 1999)

- What might action researchers promise clients?
- How theoretical can action researchers be on organizations’ time and money?

Rapoport (1970)

Three Dilemmas in Action Research

Tavistock stream

- Based on action research aimed at bringing psychologist, social anthropologist, and psychiatrists together during and after WWII.

Operational stream

- Bringing together mathematics, engineering, and physical sciences to solve logistical problems during WWII.
- Solve problems related to transportation, production, scheduling, and decision making by utilizing computers.

Group dynamics stream

- A more academic approach with links to experimental psychology
- Studies on: Leadership, power, group dynamics, stress, and identity.
- Emphasis on the individual and small groups rather than the individual in relation to large scale social systems

Applied anthropology stream

- American in origin and engaged in psychological warfare, intelligence, and administration of occupied territories.
- Emphasizes the concept of culture.
- Different streams; e.g. Harvard Business School: Studies on relationship between work satisfaction and productivity

Ethical dilemmas 1/3

- Concern of the effects on the client of confrontation with the researcher's perception of what was "really" going on.
 - "Solved" by distinguishing between the research components and the therapeutic aspects.
- Is the client acceptable to the researcher?
 - Public vs. private client
 - Public welfare – e.g. tobacco companies
 - Suggested solution is to find common values and interests the research project

Ethical dilemmas 2/3

- Protection and confidentiality of the respondents
 - Not different from other field research but applies stronger to AR because of the nature of research topics
 - Suggested solution is to make findings available to “the counterpart” – e.g. both managers, workers, and labor unions.
- Protection of the client’s interests – e.g. the researcher is being approach by a “competitor”.
 - Suggested solution is e.g. to delay publication of results or to publish in such a way that it protects the client’s interests.

Ethical dilemmas 3/3

- Personal involvement with the client's organization.
 - Suggested solution is to make an explicit agreement with the client not to make offers on jobs etc.
- Political motivation for the client in having a “competing” researcher redo studies if the findings are “dissatisfying”.
 - Suggested solution is to considerable diagnostics work and testing out alternate views before engaging to see if the are merited.

Practical dilemmas

- Goal dilemmas
 - Academic theory vs. solving of “real world” problems
 - Timing for publishing the findings – rigor vs. relevance.
- Dilemmas of initiative
 - If the client takes the initiative for research the area of interest may be shifted by the researcher.
 - The researcher can come up with findings of problems with no apparent solution.
 - Increasingly complex research areas is often influenced by factors and organizations outside the clients control.

Conclusion

- The action research advocated is that of optimizing the practical affairs and providing intellectual interest for the academic community.

Baskerville & Wood-Harper (1996)

A Critical Perspective on Action Research as a Method for Information Systems Research

Some claims in the article

- Claim 1: Doing Action Research is risky.
- Claim 2: AR is the best approach for studying human methods.
- Claim 3: The difficulty with AR may be a matter of degree in comparison with other qualitative methods.
- Claim 4: AR results can be generalized.

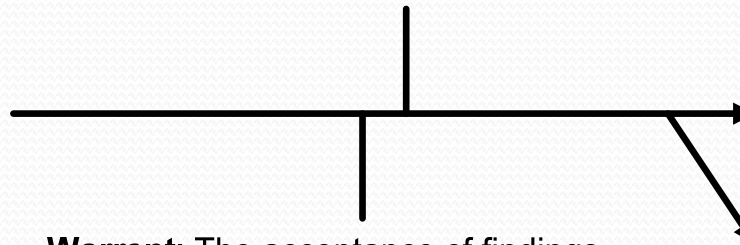
Claim 1: Doing Action Research is risky

Data: Present scientific institutions in IS broadly favour the current philosophy of the natural sciences.

AR never succeeded in procuring major status in the main stream of social psychology or social science research

Rebuttal: More recent post-positivist views have recognized the limitations of positivist approaches.

IS research deals extensively with developing new or improving existing artifacts and human methods.



Warrant: The acceptance of findings based on (action) research depends to a large extent on the scientific community.

IS is not intrinsically different from any other research field applying AR.

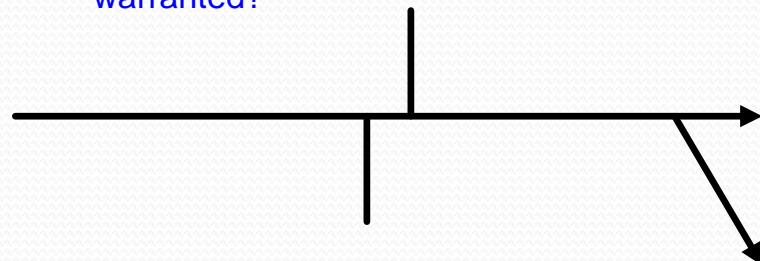
Claim: IS action researchers (*risk* that their) findings will be rejected on philosophical grounds...

Qualifier: provided they don't do *rigorous* AR.

Claim 2: AR is the best approach for studying human methods.

Data: Other research approaches are non-interventionist.

Question: Does the narrow and/or constrained research scope of the other approaches necessarily imply that AR is warranted?



Claim: AR, as a research method in the study of human methods, is the most scientifically legitimate approach available

Warrant: The introduction of methodical changes necessarily requires intervention.

(Thus, some research questions cannot be effectively answered by any other research method than AR).

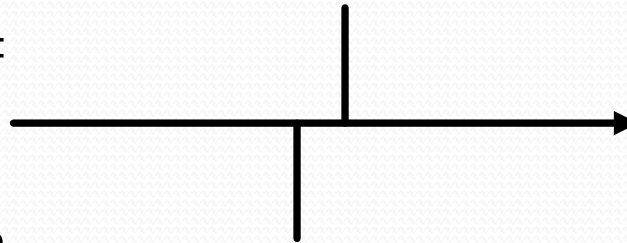
Qualifier: Indeed, where a specific new methodology is being studied AR may be the only relevant research method presently available

Claim 3: The difficulty with AR may be a matter of degree

Data: A number of problems confront the action researcher:

- lack of impartiality
- lack of discipline
- confusion with consulting
- AR's context-bound nature

Question: To what degree should we accept these difficulties?



Claim: The difficulty with action research may be a matter of degree, rather than taxonomy and the easy loss of scientific rigor.

Warrant: These problems confront researchers using alternative methods as well.

Claim 4: AR results can be generalized

Data: For AR the traditional foundation of generalisation is problematic.

Qualifier: But action researchers must exercise restraint in their conclusions, since these must be reported from a limited number of observations.

Claim: Action researchers legitimately can generalise their findings, on the basis of the validity of their research.

Warrant: Generalisation based on the validity of AR, although lacking any substantial proof of reliability; is no less acceptable than generalisation from statistical samples based on reliability, yet lacking substantial proof of validity.